

BODY MAPPING: VISUAL RESEARCH & TRANSFORMATIVE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

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This article explores body mapping, a participant-driven approach wherein people create richly illustrated life-size maps that articulate their embodied experiences relative to various issues. First developed in the global South as a means of community mobilization and advocacy regarding women's health and HIV-related care needs, body mapping is now used by researchers, health practitioners, and community agencies globally to explore social determinants of health among diverse groups. This work is relevant to social science and health scholars, community agencies, and those in activist circles who are interested in using body mapping in their mindful academic and applied work.

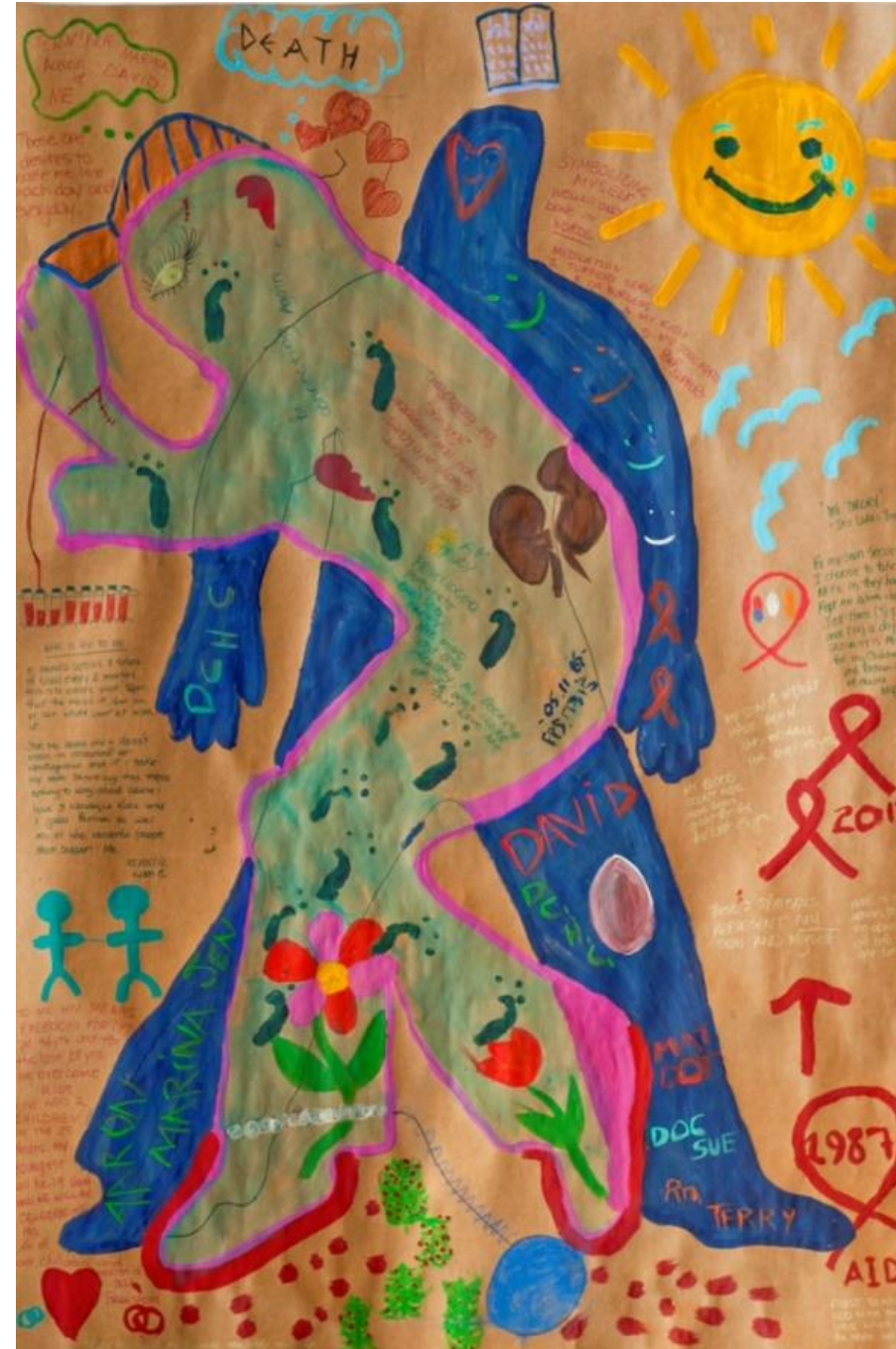
I used this innovative methodology as part of a collaborative ethnographic study conducted between 2011 and 2013 in the Canadian cities of Vancouver, British Columbia and London, Ontario. The project was designed to explore how gender and embodiment shape the lived experiences of HIV-positive women and men who struggle with addictions, HIV stigma, and inter-generational trauma. We conducted individual interviews, recorded observational fieldnotes, and two body mapping workshops were held, one with women (n=6) and one with men (n=5).

I have written extensively about the powerful role that the arts, therapeutic practice, and human connection play in the production of this visually driven research (Orchard, 2017). Establishing a safe, supportive space was the most important aspect of this project and it helped make the creative process a more welcoming experience for the participants. This aspect of the research process is often commented on by the women and men who took part in the study, particularly in the narratives they wrote to accompany their body maps. This article features the women's maps and written stories they produced to explain their visual creation to those who view them.

The women's maps are littered with complex symbols and textual references that tell their unique stories with powerful emotive and political force. Five of these six women are Indigenous and their creations bear the on-going scars of colonization, including state-mandated institutionalization of children in residential schools and the devastation caused by widespread cultural dispossession from their land, sacred knowledge, and integrity as sovereign peoples. Yet the maps also reflect resilience and agency, to survive HIV and create meaning in their lives when and where they can. They are the authors of their own stories, today and always.

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The Women's Maps & Narratives



Abby

Hey, I'm Abby and I'm a healthy, strong woman who's been living with HIV for 25 plus years. When I did the Body Mapping workshop it was unlike any other experience that I've ever had. I felt honored and privileged to be part of the workshop. On the top right hand of my map, there is a sun which symbolizes bright, happy days ahead and to come. I also have a lot of colors, smiles, and flowers to fulfill everything in life. Everybody has their own way of living. I myself don't think about the doctor's appointments or medication because that would be dwelling. For myself, I kind of take what I have and I incorporate it into a bit of educating, like a peer would do. If I can help a neighbor, I am there for them. For me, Body Mapping represents me just being me. My colors are bright. The smiles are free. The hearts and the love are passion and duals are never alone. Being healthy, happy and strong is a definite sign that being HIV positive is normal. Anyone can be that way.

Georgia

My name is Ginev which means “small eagle feather” and I am a Native woman from the Cree Nation who is living with HIV for 25 years. I made this Body Map at a workshop in May 2012. For me, Body Mapping was quite an emotional experience, bringing up the past and having to relive it. I am grateful for the opportunity to create this beautiful Body Map. In the top left-hand corner of my Body Map you will see a picture of a microscope. This symbol represents science and researchers. I chose this symbol because I am hoping the researchers of the world come up with a vaccine or a cure for HIV. I am very proud of my Body Map and the story it tells about my life. I hope that when you look at my Body Map you will see someone who has been through a lot and is still a survivor. For me living with HIV is not a death sentence or ALL about pain and suffering. Rather living with HIV is about learning how to survive the illness and learning to manage it. The Creator put us here for a reason and the reasons may not be the best at times, but they are all we’ve got. All my Relations.





Sue

This is my Body Map. I am proud, positive and passionate. I am an Educator. The process of Body Mapping helped me to look at my life, where I had been, where I am now and where I am going. This journey through my life was emotional and at times “raw”. The symbol of death is what I thought when I was first diagnosed with HIV in 2006 at age 50. The arrows are my journey through life; leaving home, having a family, then going down and hitting rock bottom. I was homeless, then lived in a filthy SRO (Single Room Occupancy) and now I am on a proud pathway. The hands are those that helped me along the way. The colors embrace the Medicine Wheel (black, red, white and yellow). The blue represents the waters and sky for endless opportunities and the brown is Mother Earth, which nurtures me.

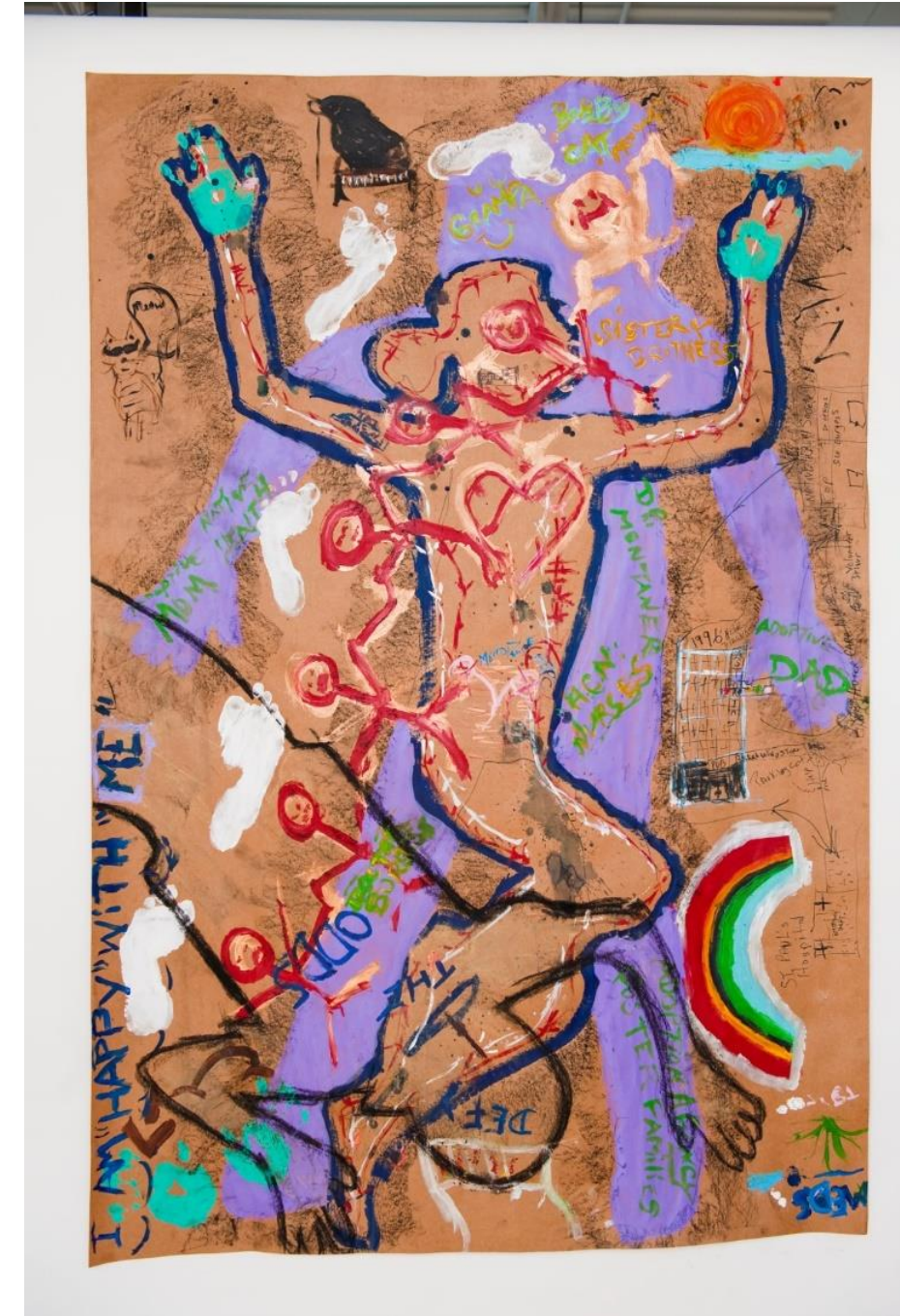
For me living with HIV is a very “positive thing”. The Creator made me positive for a reason. I teach. I speak. I travel. I learn. And best of all, I LIVE everyday with passion. I worried about menopause, the effects of my meds and what it was doing to my kidneys, liver and heart. With the support of my children, Dr. Susan Burgess, my nurses, HIV organizations and my peers, I NO LONGER WORRY! Each day is a gift. This is my Journey ~ my Life Map. Háw'aa.

Tarah

I am a Native woman who is living with HIV. For me, the Body Mapping experience was a challenge to unravel and piece together my journey from sickness and back to health. I am very grateful for the opportunity to create this beautiful Body Map. On my Body Map, you see white feet and I chose that color to say where I come from with white people raising me. My feet also represent my toes because my toes are kind of funny looking. My feet are walking towards you. At the top left corner, you will see a grand piano and a cool cat. These symbols represent my lifelines. These two things keep my spirituality alive.

In the top right- hand corner, you will see a sun and the names of people who are important to me. These represent where I am going and the people who supported me. It is a long journey. My feet show that it has taken me a long a time to get where I have come from to where I am going. On the right-hand side of the picture you will see Vancouver Native Health and it is important because it represents the beginning of my journey from chaos to where I am now. The people in the middle of my Body Map represent the people who have helped get me to where I am now. You will also see St. Paul's Hospital and it represents where I got better.

I am very proud of my Body Map and the story it tells about my life. I hope that when you look at my Body Map you will see someone who has been challenged and doesn't mind it! I hope you see someone





Isabel

I am a First Nations Cree woman who is living with HIV. I made this Body Map, which I am very proud of, in May 2012. This is how it goes...My Body Map is all about the beauty and strength of the human spirit. You will see on the right- hand side of the map the Four Directions symbol which has kept me above ground. I truly believe that I do have angels. On the left-hand side you will see the sun and my children's names (my strengths). As you go down you will see many different drawings and symbols and words. Those were the most challenging points in my life. I overcame everything. In the middle of the map is a part which is black. For me that means that I have to be aware, careful and stay adherent to my medications and not let the blackness take me. For me it's called paying attention and loving it!!

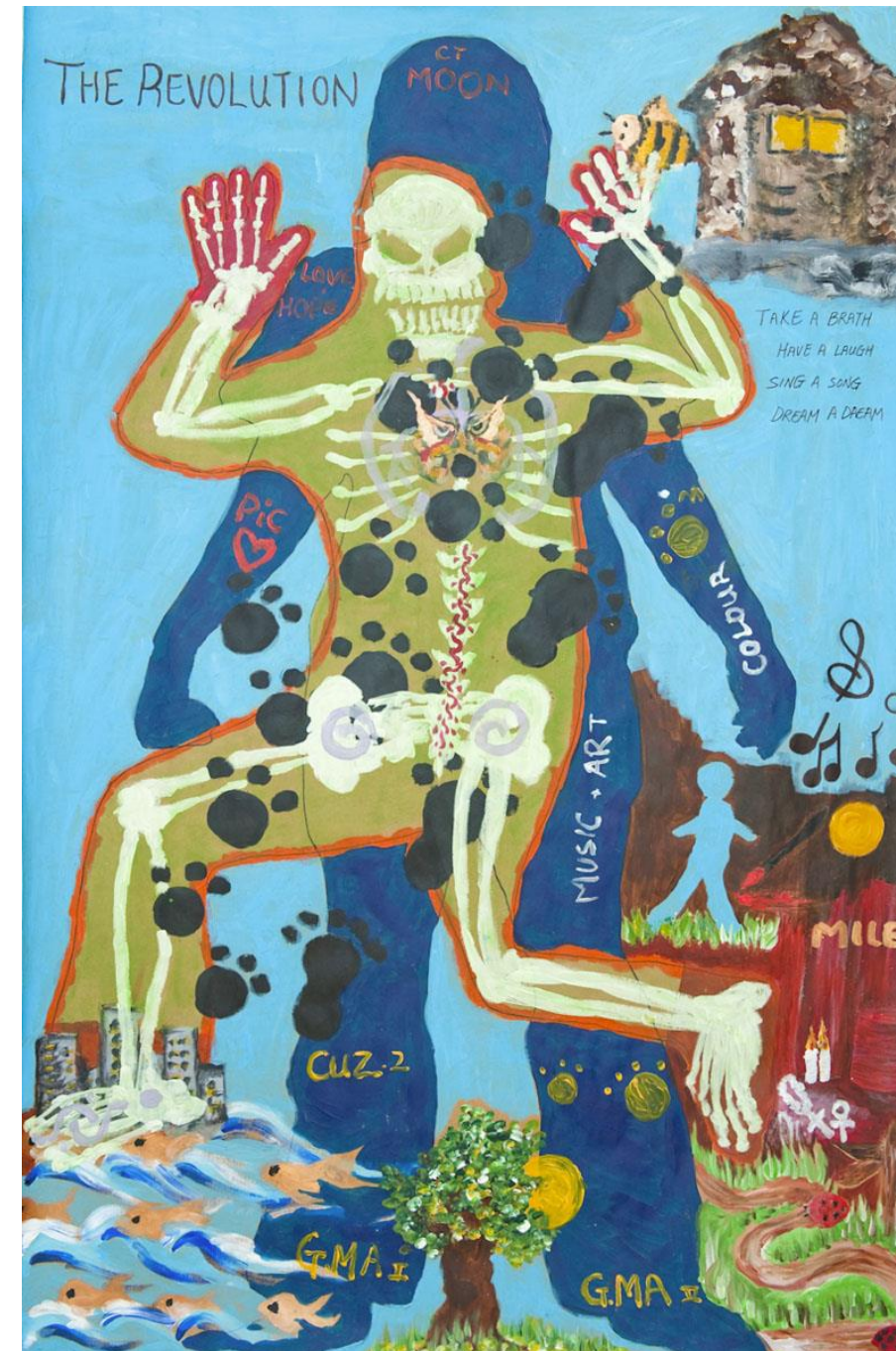
There are so many great symbols, words, quotes, and drawings on my map. I am very true to what I believe in and that is freedom from the circus life, love like it's nobody else's business, be kind, and "think positive". I truly hope when you see my Body Map, you see a strong beautiful, courageous, loving, First Nations woman. Living with HIV has totally changed my life. I have met so many wonderful people and have gone to many workshops and retreats. I am a lucky girl knowing that I am not alone and yes, there is such a thing as "unconditional love". Thank you for taking the time to see my map. Enjoy.

P.S. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the special people and organizations who have supported me, loved me, and encouraged me. Peace.

Rayna

I have been living with HIV for almost 14 years. This is my Body Map. I started drugs when I was 15. At one point I was living on the street and homeless for a while. My world was cold and dark. I was living day by day and didn't know when I was going to get my next meal. I still remember walking on the snow with a pair of old shoes full of holes. My feet were cold and numb. When I was diagnosed with HIV, I was 21. I was confused and didn't understand and had a lot of frustrations. I got on treatment right away, worked on my habits, got off drugs and learned something more important. I used this knowledge to reorganize my days. Being HIV positive is a full-time job to keep healthy. Some positive things have happened in my life. I started to see life with gratitude. I have a chance to make some positive changes. I learned this from a book, "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning to dance in the rain."

Whenever I need a little courage, I try to think positive and repeat those words in my head. Now I am a peer support worker. God never gives us more than we can handle. All we need to do is keep trying. Negative thoughts are what used to hold me back most of the time. But yet, people say, "Good fortune shines away from gloom. Keep your spirit up. Good things will come to you and you will come to good things." I am a blessing. Thank you so much to all the doctors and scientists who have worked so hard over the years. The HIV medications have kept me healthy for these many years. Thank you for giving me a second chance.



REFERÊNCIAS

Orchard, T. *Remembering the Body: Ethical Issues in Body Mapping Research*. NYC: Springer Press, 2017.

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